

EL PASO DE ROBLES YOUTH CORRECTIONAL FACILITY

The El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility (YCF) is located on Airport Road off Highway 46 in Paso Robles. It is operated by the Division of Juvenile Justice, which is under the California Youth and Adult Correctional Agency. As a result of a statewide reorganization in July of 2005, the Youth and Adult Correctional Agency is now a part of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

The facility provides custodial care and treatment for male juvenile offenders who are referred to as “wards.” Their ages range from 13 to 25 years, with the average age being 16.5 years. Wards committed to the institution do not receive determinant (specific) sentences; rather, their release dates are determined by the Youthful Offender Parole Board, and are based on overall behavior and participation in correctional and rehabilitative programs.

METHOD

Members of the grand jury met with the superintendent and senior staff members of the YCF and were provided with an overview of the facility operations, relevant statistical and informational data, and an opportunity to ask questions. We were subsequently given a tour of the housing, medical, educational, and other areas of the institution.

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code, Section 919(b) states: “The grand jury shall inquire into the condition and management of the public prisons within the county.”

NARRATIVE

We were welcomed to the YCF by the superintendent and the chief of security. Since the last grand jury visit in 2004, new security procedures have been put into effect. We were required to wear a device which emits a signal if activated or triggered by the wearer. The device tracks wearers anywhere in the facility, and if one is activated, officers will immediately respond to that location.

Firearms are not allowed anywhere within the secure area of the facility. The only equipment correctional officers can use are pepper-ball launchers, and then only in extreme circumstances.

The current population of the YCF is 250 to 275 wards. This is down from approximately 900 in 1997. This decrease, common to all Division of Juvenile Justice facilities, is the result of legislation enacted by the state in 1997, which financially discouraged counties from sending lesser-offending juveniles to state institutions. Under that legislation, juveniles committed to the Division of Juvenile Justice are evaluated according to the seriousness of their offense. They are then designated as category one to seven, with category one being the most serious crime category. A sliding scale determines how much counties must pay the state for housing juvenile offenders. For categories one through four—serious offenders who most probably should be committed to a state facility—counties are charged \$1800 per offender, annually. For category seven (least serious) offenders, however, the charge is \$38,000 annually. This has resulted in counties finding alternative ways of dealing with juveniles who commit minor offenses. Those not incarcerated at the county level may be placed in foster homes, group homes, or diverted to community-based treatment programs.

As a consequence of this legislation, the Department of Juvenile Justice population statewide has decreased from more than 8700 in 1997, to its current level of approximately 3800. Three institutions and two fire camps have been closed.

Consequently, the YCF is underutilized and the resultant operating costs per ward have increased. Additionally, because of the higher-risk status of the current ward population, programs which involved wards working outside the facility, such as community and highway clean-up, landscaping work, and firefighting activities, have been curtailed.

HOUSING

Prior to being assigned to a state correctional institution, wards are processed through one of two state reception centers where they undergo medical, psychological, and educational assessments. Their backgrounds and family histories are also evaluated. Upon arriving at the YCF, each ward is assigned to one of several housing units (cottages) based on the type or severity of his offense,

his mental health status, willingness to conform to rules, expected length of confinement, and other criteria. The cottages we toured appeared clean and well maintained.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING

The facility maintains a fully accredited high school program, which must comply with all state requirements, including the high school exit exam. Remedial education and special education classes are also provided, since, at time of commitment, the average educational level of wards in reading and mathematics is fourth to fifth-grade.

Vocational programs include training in food services, cabinetry, construction, landscaping, and janitorial work.

Programs in place to address other needs of the wards include individual and family counseling, gang avoidance, wards' rights, and substance abuse prevention. The wards also participate in an "Interactive Journaling" program. This requires that they make regular entries in workbooks, covering topics such as body image, building healthy relationships, self-esteem, stress and anger management, and ways to enhance physical and mental health. The program is intended to instill a desire to improve behavior.

MEDICAL TREATMENT

The medical staff includes a full time physician, dentist, psychiatrist, and psychologist, in addition to other personnel such as dental assistants, registered nurses, and counselors. Approximately 30 wards per month are subject to random drug testing. Staff members are also tested according to union regulations. The medical staff was very forthcoming and cooperative with the grand jurors, and the offices were clean and orderly. There appears to be a more than adequate number of medical professionals to care for the diminishing population.

CONCLUSION

Because most of the wards confined at the YCF have committed serious crimes, violent incidents have occurred and will inevitably continue to occur. Nevertheless, the staff is taking the necessary steps to maintain a reasonably safe environment for everyone confined within or

working at the facility. The primary emphasis, as it must be in any custodial institution, is on security and public safety; however, there appears to be a real commitment toward rehabilitation among both the management and staff of the El Paso de Robles Youth Correctional Facility.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

This is an informational report. No formal response is required.